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ABSTRACT

This is a study of how young children gain social competence through pretend play or role playing. Subjects were 38 Caucasian children (19 females, 19 males) who were observed at four ages: 12, 18, 24 and 30 months. The same set of toys, which included a doll, a saucepan, doll bottles, coffee mug, teacup, teaspoon, doll crib, blanket, toy phone and dump truck, was presented to children of all ages during individual 10-minute sessions. After a short interval of free play, pretend play activities were encouraged with such statements as "The baby is hungry, feed the baby". Results showed that the percentage of children who pretended to feed increased from 42 percent at 12 months to 95 percent at 30 months, with the greatest leap between 12 to 18 months. There was also a shift from self as a recipient agent to the doll as a recipient agent. Even at 12 months children demonstrated little confusion between eating utensils. At 18 months, feeding is the predominant activity with the doll; older children were more likely to put the doll to sleep, dress, spank, and scold, etc. It is supposed that children create an informal child culture which changes in structure with increasing maturity. It is in the privacy and safety of play, with its principles of entry and organization, that children coordinate their movement toward the mastery of basic social conventions and principles. (MS)

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The Social Competence of Play

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The Merrill-Palmer Institute

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It has always been difficult to conceptualize a satisfying image of a socially mature adult. Not that there have been no attempts to do so. On the one hand, we have biological-soul models in which the thrust, form and direction of development over the life cycle comes from within the individual. For example, Erikson (1950) posed a successive series of dialectical polarities - generativity vs. stagnation, ego integrity vs. despair. By way of contrast, we have cultural-shaping models for which the goal of human development is the production of socially desirable behaviors. Until recently, the choice of images has been between vast universals and local particulars, between genetic unfolding and teaching by socialization agents.

A new image is emerging, one which may help us recast the question of formal and informal learning. The image calls upon processes such as regulation, reciprocity and control; elements such as boundaries, roles, self and other. Moreover, the new image emphasizes the orderliness and organization of behavior in a given social-physical space. From psychology, we have the pioneering work of Roger Barker and his colleagues (Barker,1968; Gump,1971) who studied what goes on in ordinary places - schools, homes, street corners, drug stores. In a similar spirit we have the work of investigators such as Irwin Altman (Altman,1976) who have proposed middle level constructs such as "privacy" seen as the way people regulate the boundaries between themselves and others. From sociology, we have a new appreciation of how adults function

in socially integrated systems. Goffman (1971) has offered us a wonderous kalaidescope of ordinary social minutiae - the small rituals, body postures and subtle inflections which lubricate the regulation of social life. Among others, Garfinkel (1967) has reminded us of the endogenous orderliness of mundane activities such as queing, greeting and inquiring. Once posed, the questions seem simple and obvious - how does one negotiate a place in line, establish a turn at talk, or use inquiries such as "Where did I put my keys?" or "Do me a favor?"

As we begin to envision the remarkable intricacy, orderliness, and countless adjustments required of adult human beings in any human community, we confront the tantalizing question: how do kids ever get to be competent adults? Just consider variations in the rules for queing. Some ques operate on the rule of "first come, first served"; others use numbered tickets, or a status rule (adults before children), or a vulnerability rule (women and children before men). Think of the enormity of role variations demanded by common place social circumstances. We have assymetrical institutional roles (parent-child, teacher-student, boss-employee, waiter-diner). But we also have special function roles such as mother-father or fireman-policeman. The problem facing developmental analysis is that children do not acquire these rules and role relationships through a formal system of training. I know of no formal curriculum which explicitly teaches children about the order of service, about making an inquiry or asking a favor and how to do so in a role congruent manner. It seems to me that the problem, a vast one to be sure, is to discover how children, in the course of ordinary mundane activities

acquire a multiplicity of social trivia which signifies the integration and belonging to a community of others.

I would like to suggest that the process begins at birth, that the first rules are acquired as a delicate set of mutual adaptations between infant and caregiver so nicely described by Sander (1976), Brazelton (1962) and Escalona (1973).

By about 12 months of age, a new order of competence appears. The child begins to display a new form of activity often referred to as symbolic play. At first the child might simply eat from an empty spoon or drink from an empty cup, but from then on, play increasingly acquires the characteristic of an informal though organized childhood activity. As Sutton-Smith and his co-workers have so nicely documented (cf Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971) the play of older children is remarkable for its internal coherence, for the shared rules and rhythms which children learn so easily. With age, the games of school age children increasingly exhibit a lucid definition of roles, allocations of turns, provisions for role reversals, for beginning and ending, for ~~making~~ success or failure. It has been argued that games represent, in symbolic form, the world view of a given social system, its preoccupations and its position regarding whether and how man controls his destiny (cf Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971; Moore and Anderson, 1969).

But let us not forget that play as an ordinary, mundane activity presents a rather special challenge to the young child. It requires two quite different kinds of mastery. First, the child must learn the rules and roles required by a particular game he wants to play. Second, the

child must learn how to join a game, how to enter an ongoing activity or how to start one from scratch.

The Problem of entry. Over the years, my students have provided me with specimen records of the play of preschool children. Illustrations from the records illustrate the entry problem.

In the first example, a group of 5 year-olds are playing hospital. They have created patients tucked into doll beds and wagons. There is a doctor and a character who moves from telephone, to sink, to patients with a demeanor that shifts from something like a nurse (pulse taking) to something more like a mother (cooking food). Now an outsider approaches the group, watches for a few minutes and queries, "Can I Play?" The players barely glance at the intruder. "Can I Play?" - no answer. "Can I play?" - no answer. Finally, several requests later comes the firm answer "No." But only a short time later, a second outsider approaches, watches, and then approaches a patient in a wagon announcing "He's pretty sick. I'm going to take him to the ambulance." "OK" comes the response from the nurse "drive carefully."

The same kind of difference appears when children erect barriers to protect the privacy of their play. One group was playing fort. Outsiders who approached with "Can I play?" were summarily rejected. But one child cracked the code. He approached shouting "the Indians are coming, the Indians are coming."

A similar entry problem appears when two children encounter one another. If the first child says "Hi" the second child might counter

with "Hi" but the chances are that the exchange stops right there. A more successful entry occurs when the first child says something like "guess what I have in my pocket." If the second child guesses, which usually happens, the retort is "No, guess again." From then on, the coupling is assured.

I use these examples, and there are countless others, to suggest that at several levels play poses authentic problems in the management of social encounters, and that one such problem has to do with gaining entry to activities with others. Entry strategies govern the control of privacy and regulate the boundaries between self and other. What is intriguing is that the strategies children use in such situations are not literally copied from adults although they might acquire general principles from observing adults. It is unlikely that children are explicitly taught such strategies, although talented nursery school teachers will often coach an unsuccessful child. Children might learn from one another. If so, the transmission is probably in the opening moves of a socio-dramatic scenario: "Let's play house. You be the little sister, you be the big sister and we are going to church now."

The concept of role. Which brings us to the question of how children acquire the concept of a role. To the child, what manner of creature is "a little sister," "a big sister," "a mother," a "doctor" or "a patient?" Young children play out a role in various ways, as if they were working off a collection of role features, some subset of which is at any time sufficient to constitute the character. A little sister

is often someone mother holds by the hand, coaxes into eating, bustles into bed. Someone who talks in a tiny voice and says "Mommy, can I--?" In contrast, a big sister is someone to whom mother assigns chores, who might dress up to go out or make dates on the phone. The core characterization of "little sister" is infantile competence and dependency, whereas the core characterization of "big sister" is adult like competence and independent contact with the world outside the home. The rendering of little sister's mother stresses nurturance and responsibility, whereas big sister's mother is more of a home foreman and gatekeeper. Children support these characterizations by a host of devices - body postures, physical proximity and contact, words, tonal variations and props - which can be added or deleted. As the activity progresses, roles can be shifted, modified or reversed, but only within limits. It is not unusual for a child to assert "sisters don't do that" and a change is usually signalled "I'll be grandma."

Although the suggestion has yet to be taken seriously, Bateson (1956) speculated that the power of such play was not in the child's original learning of core role characteristics since the play, itself, presupposes that a particular role concept has already been mastered. What children might learn is that there is such a thing as a role, that roles are reversable, exchangeable, distinctive sets of demeanors, and that the playing of roles requires the consensus and collusion of others.

The feeding game. Now, let's move down developmentally. In shaky form, sociodramatic play begins to appear by about three years of age. Yet its primitive elements emerge at about 12 months of age when children begin to play "the feeding game." Give the baby an ordinary utensil

such as a tablespoon. The chances are that he will bring the spoon to his lips, bowl upwards, tilt the spoon, tip his head back and gesturally "eat" from the spoon. We designed a study to give us some information about how young children play the game and how it changes with age. We wanted to know what ordinary, mundane tools would be used in the game, when the child would begin to use a doll as the recipient agent of food, and how the choice of utensil and the choice of agent would change with age.

The data used in the present analyses were taken from a longitudinal study of 38 caucasian children (19 females, 19 males) who were observed at four ages (12, 18, 24, 30 months). The children came from lower-middle and middle class families. The fathers were employed in white and blue collar occupations and the parents' educational level did not exceed two years beyond high school.

The same set of toys was presented to the children at all four ages. The set included realistic-appearing toys and objects which would be familiar to most, if not all, children. The set contained a doll, a pint-size saucepan, a large wooden spoon, a metal teaspoon, a 6 inch plastic baby bottle, a 2-inch plastic doll bottle, a 6-inch plastic coffee mug, and a 2-inch plastic toy tea cup. It should be noted that the spoons, bottles and cups were of two sizes, but only the doll bottle could be considered miniaturized. Preliminary analyses failed to reveal stable size differences and so subsequent analyses were performed on tool categories collapsed over size. In order to encourage diverse and elaborated pretend activities, the toy set also included a doll crib, a blanket, a toy phone and a dump truck.

The child visited the play room with his mother who remained in the room with him during the 10 minute observation period. A female adult presented the toys by setting them out on the floor in a prescribed order in a semi-circle. She invited the child to play with these and then seated herself at the periphery. After allowing a free play interval she made a series of five timed verbal suggestions (e.g. "The baby is hungry, feed the baby," the baby wants to go for a ride. Take the baby for a ride) to encourage the child to engage in a range of pretend play activities. This technique was based on preliminary pilot studies which had indicated that in the absence of specific encouragement pretend is a relatively infrequent behavior at the ages of the children in this study. All of the child's activities were observed by a trained observer through a one-way mirror and orally tape recorded using a pre-coded system of verb actions coupled with the objects used in each act. Inter-observer agreement for the 6 observers ranged from 71% to 95% for feeding activities, 65% to 90% for cooking activities, and 90% to 95% for tool and/or agent. Due to the ambiguity and fleetingness of early pretend behaviors, coding categories of pretend were carefully defined and agreement among observers was established in a series of training sessions which involved filmed and live episodes of play. Observer agreement was assessed during training, immediately after training and when the children were 24 and 30 months old. Procedures are described in detail elsewhere (Kessen and Fein, 1975).

The results confirmed much of what we suspected and raised some intriguing puzzles. First, as shown in Table 1, the percentage of children who pretended to feed increased from 42 percent at 12 months to 95 percent at 30 months. Not surprisingly,-the greatest leap occurred between 12 and 18 months. Second, considering only the children who produced at least one pretend activity, it is clear that there is a shift from the self as recipient agent to the doll as recipient agent.

Put Table 1 about here

The distribution of pretend activities displayed in Figure 1 shows what happened within tool and agent categories. Comparing the two graphs at 12 months, it can be seen that 12 month choices are highly selective. The bottle, a familiar object is avoided where as the spoon and the cup are referred. It should be noted that all children in the study had been bottle fed and most were beginning to serve themselves with a cup. Very few were able to use a spoon without adult assistance.

Put Figure 1 about here

By 18 months, the organization of the feeding game has altered dramatically. Suddenly children discover the doll. It is as if at 12 months, the absence of substance can be mastered, but the absence of animation cannot. Between 12 and 18 months, preference for the doll shows a four-fold increase, but more importantly, the increase occurs largely with

respect to a particular tool, the bottle. It should be noted also that the order of tool preferences with the doll is sustained over the following year -- bottle first, spoon second, and cup, third. That is to say that one aspect of the feeding game becomes highly stereotyped. Over all tool categories, self-feeding declines with age. The elevation of self-feeding with the bottle at 18 months is short-lived, whereas use of the cup stabilizes at a relatively low level.

The data seem to demonstrate that there is relatively little confusion at 12 months between eating utensils. The bottle is studiously avoided and the spoon is preferred. It is as if the child is not about to represent himself as a baby, so that the use of the bottle must await the child's animation of an inanimate object, the creation of the doll as a symbolic baby who could be the recipient of nurturing care. We would argue that this event represents a major step in the child's conception of the core characteristics of a role. Let me add that at 18 months feeding is the predominant activity with the doll. By 24 months, other activities emerge which flesh out the core characteristics of the relation between caregiver and infant. Children become more likely to put the doll to sleep, scold it, dress it, groom it, spank it, or toilet train it. Furthermore, they are more likely to maintain and integrate activity sequences over relatively extended periods of time. Nevertheless, tool preferences in the feeding game achieve a fixed and stereotypic quality which, perhaps, ensures communication of the role relationship being represented.

At 24 months the child is not quite ready to coordinate his newly erected representations with those of his peers. Moreover, when children of this age

do initiate a dramatic play sequence, they typically render the assymetrical relation of parent to child or teacher to child, within which they must play the part of the adult. Just as at an earlier age, they combine a well-mastered activity (feeding-eating) with a feeding tool they had not quite mastered in real life, so now they select a familiar role relation, but choose the role which in real life they do not have much opportunity to practice. In the absence of a cooperating peer partner, the game can develop into a more or less elaborate pantomime, but role reversals are precluded. By three years of age, peer coordination begins to emerge, and children begin to master the principle of a role as a reciprocal, temporary, reversable presentation of the self, controllable by the self and supported by the agreement of others. Now pretend play provides a form through which children can achieve mastery of a significant social concept with its countless embellishments, variants and coordinations.

In the present paper we have argued that children create an informal child culture which changes in structure with increasing maturity. It is a play culture which requires little explicit adult tutelage or intervention; yet it is in the privacy and safety of play, with its principles of entry and organization, that children coordinate their movement toward the mastery of basic social conventions and principles.

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Table 1

Percentage of Children at Each Age Who Pretended to Feed by Their Choice of Tools and Recipient Agent

	Percentage of the Total Group				Percentage of Pretend Feeders			
Tools:	12 mos	18 mos	24 mos	30 mos	12 mos	18 mos	24 mos	30 mos
Cup	18	28	45	47	44	28	50	50
Spoon	29	63	63	66	69	75	71	69
Pot	11	3	3	0	25	3	3	0
Bottle	5	76	82	86	13	91	91	86
n	38	38	38	38	16	32	34	36
Recipient Agent:	12 mos	18 mos	24 mos	30 mos	12 mos	18 mos	24 mos	30 mos
Doll	8	74	82	95	19	88	91	100
Self	34	58	53	37	81	69	59	39
Other	13	16	21	16	31	19	24	17
n	38	38	38	38	16	32	34	36

Figure 1. Percentage of children who pretended to feed by their choice of tool or agent.